

# Other times

## *Fare-thee-well, Mrs. Sciola*

By CHRIS POON

The walls are primary yellow, trimmed with a bright, sky blue. On them neatly penned labels identify The Clock, The Flag, The Door.

This is Donna Sciola's home. When she leaves in June, she'll leave behind Sandy the hamster, knee-high chairs and 25 years of teaching.

Mrs. Sciola — I never knew her first name until this year — was my first-grade teacher. Now I hear she's retiring.

So I thought it only fitting that I write my last story for *The Narragansett Times* about the woman who taught me how to write neatly on wide-ruled paper and how to grow lima beans in a plastic cup.

When Mrs. Sciola spoke, she was direct. Subject, verb, object. Now, years later and just 15 minutes after Wednesday's students climbed aboard buses bound for home, she recounted



(Photo by Ray Clayton)

**DONNA SCIOLA, a first-grade teacher at Peace Dale School, will retire in June after teaching 25 years at the school.**

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her classroom career in the same manner.

"Peace Dale School is very special to me," she said, her eyes moist. "It's been like a second home to me for 25 years or more."

The school's significance runs deep in her family. When she was a first-grader at the Kingston Hill Grammar School, her father died. Her mother, E. Lois Gilbert, was left with four children to support.

Mrs. Gilbert became a fifth-grade teacher at Peace Dale — the school where her daughter would visit frequently after high school let out.

It was during her high school days, while working in the meat department of a local grocery store, that she met her husband-to-be.

Clemente "Clint" Sciola was eight years older, a South Kingstown native and a Peace Dale School alumnus.

They married in 1960 and promptly moved to San Bernardino, Calif., where she put into practice the teaching theories she learned at the University of Rhode Island. A son was born, a couple years passed and they moved back.

"I had never been away from home. I had never been away from my family and friends," she recalled. "We missed the ocean, the change of seasons."

The Sciolas wanted to raise a family in South County, where bad habits and fads born on the West Coast took years to reach the other side.

"We felt as if we could buy 10 years of time if we moved back to New England," she said.

What she couldn't forestall

were the personal catastrophes: her husband died of a diabetic-related illness at age 56; her mother died a year later. Mrs. Sciola also suffered two heart attacks.

"I've had a lot of tragedies happen to me in the past few years, and Peace Dale has held me together. The school was my salvation."

She's been a first-grade teacher there since 1965. During the first four years, her mother taught at Hazard School a mile away.

Teaching became her life. "We just have a multitude of teachers in our family," she said, giving credit to her father, who was a URI agriculture professor, her two sisters, a brother, and her mom. All of them taught.

While family ties may have led her to her profession, Mrs. Sciola, 52, credits Peace Dale School's warm and caring staff and her students with keeping her in it.

"The very nature of this physical plant makes for a close-knit school," she said. Since classrooms are older and smaller than the other elementary schools in the district, Peace Dale teachers have learned to share cramped quarters, she said.

"And when I'm in the classroom, I forget everything. This is where I'm focused."

Mrs. Sciola poured her energies to first-graders who have since finished college and started careers. Some have had children who enrolled in her class.

"I think that I feel good about what I do in the classroom," she said. Besides the tangible rewards of seeing her students learn to read and write, Mrs. Sciola channels the curiosity and creativity of her two dozen students into projects that they can be excited about.

"Everything is fun to them, everything is exciting. They're loving, and they're very spontaneous. I have one little girl this year who every once in a while will say, 'Teachers need hugs too' and will come up and hug me."



last year as a full-time teacher. She wants more time to visit her two sons in California and New Hampshire and time to revive her reading, gardening and painting hobbies.

"I feel that first grade is so important and that you need to be young and have a terrific amount of patience with the little ones.

"I think my time has come to pass it on to someone else before I run out of patience and before I get too old, I think the children deserve that."

Twenty years ago, I was one of Mrs. Sciola's little ones. I remember her soothing voice as she read stories to us. It was in her class that I learned to hold a pair of scissors and decorated a Mother's Day card with orange finger paint.

Once a week after school, mom would pick me up and drop me off on Main Street in front of the building that is now *The Narragansett Times* editorial office.

I was a first-grader taking piano lessons in a room currently occupied by the sports editor. I quit the lessons six years later; today I hardly know how to play.

But what Mrs. Sciola taught, I can't forget. Now I'm tapping on a keyboard of a different sort — the kind that makes up words, and strings them together. Subject, verb, object.

*(Chris Poon leaves The Narragansett Times this week for a job with The Patriot Ledger in Quincy, Mass. She covered the University of Rhode Island and*